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# Democratic Elitism and Western Political Thought [2009]

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**Abstract**: *»Die Theorie der demokratischen Elitenherrschaft und das westliche Politikverständnis«*. Many political thinkers have viewed democratic elitism as closing a democratic road they believe is or should be open-ended. Their view of democratic possibilities reflects the auspicious circumstances of Western societies during the past several centuries and especially since World War II. However, it involves a conflation of liberal and democratic values. I examine why and how this has occurred, and I argue that liberal and democratic values must be more clearly separated in today's dangerous world. In step with Schumpeter, democracy must be regarded as a method or instrumental value that in some but by no means all circumstances promotes the ultimate liberal value of actively individualistic free people.

**Keywords**: democratic and liberal values, democratization, elites, elitism.

All influential schools of Western political thought since World War II have been more or less Utopian. Assuming that political possibilities are essentially open-ended, they have been reluctant to rule out any desirable political goal as impossible. A case in point is the strong resistance to Schumpeter's conception of democracy as simply a method of representative government and his implication that democracy can never be more than this. During the past half-century Schumpeter's thesis has stuck in the craws of the many who believe that a much more open, participatory, and elite-less democracy is possible (Sartori 1987: 156-63).

The Utopian mode of recent Western political thought can be traced, in part, to the superpower status and influence of the United States since World War II and to American history's singularly fortunate, but intellectually misleading, contours. For at least a century prior to World War II, American interests and values were unthreatened by foreign powers. This enabled the United States to cultivate its own affairs and refrain from a sustained engagement with the larger world. In that favored setting and echoing their settler ancestors' aspirations to create a "new world," Americans came to regard politics as an unrestricted means for achieving their ideals, most especially a broad democratic equality. As Tocqueville highlighted, democracy has been the American touchstone, and Americans have believed that the road to it is open-ended.

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But the "exceptional" history and recent superpower influence of the United States do not alone explain the Utopian mode of recent Western political thought. One must also take into account the West's success in perfecting the organizational and technological aspects of a civilization that proved vastly more productive than any other.

Once Turkish forces were defeated at Vienna in 1683, the West's clear military superiority over the rest of the world allowed Westerners to presume that they would never be faced with cultural degradation, enslavement, or extermination at the hands of non-Western peoples. Subsequently, after about 1700, the running together of clever artisanship, scientific reasoning, and readily available land and other natural resources fostered an agreeable notion, namely that increases in economic productivity would eventually meet Western needs on a substantially equal basis. Most deep social conflicts would then dissolve.

A principled optimism about political and social possibilities flowed from these circumstances. Expectations about the long-term equalizing effects of material progress supported the idea that radically different conceptions of social justice would eventually be joined in a synthesis acceptable to all. The sense of being safe from conquests by non-Western peoples fostered a belief that, in the meantime, domestic conflicts in the pursuit of social justice could be explored fully, exploited, and fought out without risking a loss of Western civilization. Since the Enlightenment and French Revolution, Westerners have prevailingly regarded political possibilities as open-ended (Gray 2007).

This was very different from how politics were viewed during the period that antedated the West's economic and military triumphs. As portrayed by the two principal political thinkers of that earlier time, Machiavelli and Hobbes, politics are always a dangerous and difficult means for limiting – through deceit, bribery, force, and other stratagems – the potentially chaotic pursuit of self-interests in a world devoid of universally shared values. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the West's increasing optimism about political possibilities gradually undercut this essentially harsh and hopeless position. The somewhat greater optimism of Locke was followed by the unbridled utopianism of Rousseau and the early socialists and, finally, by the whole panoply of progressive liberal, socialist, and democratic thought.

After World War II the "historic West" – the countries of Western Europe plus those of British settlement in North America and the antipodes – formed a political bloc largely under American leadership. During the next four decades this Western bloc was challenged only by the radical Soviet and Chinese regimes, whose economic ineffectiveness was, however, increasingly apparent. By the early 1990s China was embracing capitalism, the Soviet Union had ceased to exist, and the republics that once comprised it, as well as the East European states earlier controlled by it, had abandoned their rival doctrinal allegiance. They sought, in effect, to join the historic West. These watershed

changes made it seem that Francis Fukuyama's forecast in 1992 of an end to major international divisions might be correct.

Early in the twenty-first century, however, there are many indications that the circumstances underpinning Western political optimism were fortuitous and transient. Although the assumption about open-ended political possibilities lingers, the circumstances that made it seem plausible have basically ended. A major reality today is that various non-Western states and sects, led by fervently anti-Western elites, possess or will soon possess weapons of mass destruction. They will then be capable of devastating Western populations, either by direct attack or as a side effect of wars between non-Western states.

In addition, in their domestic affairs, Western countries confront a serious weakening of their occupational orders which will, in a deep economic downturn like that which began in 2008, exacerbate distributional conflicts greatly. They also confront ominous environmental problems and resource shortages that threaten the material progress by which such distributional conflicts might be contained.

As the wheel of fate turns, Western countries *may* continue to enjoy important advantages over the rest of the world for several more generations. But there is no solid ground for assuming this. Despite much domestic dissension, they *may* be able to defend themselves against non-Western threats to their security, but there is also no self-evident basis for thinking this will be so. It *may* happen that increases in Western economic productivity will continue to be sufficiently large to buy off serious domestic discontents and sustain a modest degree of democratic politics through relatively painless redistributions out of an economic surplus. There is, however, no reason to take this for granted either.

If the way people think about politics mainly reflects their circumstances, these basic uncertainties in the situations of Western countries will in time give rise to a conception of political possibilities less optimistic than that which has flourished during recent centuries and especially since World War II. Yet the problems confronting the West are pressing, and the need to adopt a more realistic conception of political possibilities is urgent. Juxtaposing democratic elitism with recent Western political thought is one step in this direction.

## Liberal Practices and Democracy

A hundred years ago, personal safety and respectful treatment in most of life's contingencies were assured to members of upper- and middle-class families in Western Europe, the countries settled by English-speaking peoples, and the larger cities of Eastern Europe and Latin America. Even in African, Asian, and Middle Eastern colonial territories ruled by Europeans this was generally true for most upper- and middle-class persons without European ancestors, even as the privileges of European rulers were embarrassing and humiliating to such

"native" families. Between the well behaved, well dressed, and well spoken in all these locales, Western liberal conceptions of personal dignity and impartial justice were generally professed and broadly observed.

Around 1900, of course, such treatment did not extend in any large measure to members of lower-class families, ethnic or racial minorities, and women who acted outside traditional female roles. Especially in countries not directly influenced by British political practices, and especially when they asserted rights that dominant classes and strata did not think they had, persons in lower statuses were not reliably respected. There is no reason to suppose, however, that they were less respected or less safe from abuses than such persons had been throughout all earlier history. On the contrary, the widespread profession of liberal values among those who were well off resulted in the relatively respectful treatment of the less well off in many legal and occupational situations.

On the whole, much larger proportions of populations were accorded respect by authorities and institutions than ever before in complex societies. This meant, in turn, that larger proportions of non-elites than ever before lived lives of substantial self-respect.

In 1900, governments in Western Europe and the countries settled by English-speaking people derived much of their legitimacy from relatively contested and participatory elections of representative parliaments and assemblies. To be sure, monarchies in Denmark, Italy, the Low Countries, and Sweden claimed significant degrees of independent power, and monarchies in Austria-Hungary, Germany, Portugal, and Spain clearly wielded such power. Although suffrage was not yet universal, it was advancing toward an enfranchisement of all adult citizens. The liberal idea of political choices by at least moderately large electorates in real party competitions was the prevailing standard of political authority. In most Western countries there was no expectation that military coups were likely to veto choices made by voters.

Although this liberal political standard did not extend much beyond Western Europe and the English-speaking countries, political activists in other parts of the globe tended to accept representative government as their preferred political model. In part, of course, this reflected Western colonial power. But whatever the cause, liberal political principles were dominant intellectually, and liberal practices were beginning to spread widely at the twentieth century's start.

The period around 1900 could well be seen, in retrospect, as the high water mark in liberalism's advance. Serious interruptions of liberal practices occurred subsequently in many West European countries. Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, and Spain all experienced the suppression of liberal practices for substantial periods before, during, or after World War II. For long periods during the twentieth century, moreover, the Soviet Union and its satellite countries professed communist

principles that in practice disregarded the personal rights involved in liberalism, and they eschewed meaningful electoral contests and choices.

Today, unlike 1900, no Western liberal country exerts much political influence and power outside the historic West except, insofar as raw power goes, the United States. Developments during the first decade of the twenty-first century indicate that US power, not to mention US influence, is attenuating. Outside the West, except for Japan, Israel, and a few scattered ex-British colonies such as India and Ghana, adherence to liberal principles and practices is precarious at best.

It is certainly no longer the case that members of upper- and middle-class families are assured of safety and respectful treatment in the cities of Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, South and Southeast Asia. In the face of criminal and political kidnapping on a scale unknown since the Middle Ages, the safety, personal liberty, and self-respect of educated, wealthy, and politically prominent persons and families are now frequently at risk. As they were historically before the appearance of liberal and semi-liberal states, politics in much of the world are again a dangerous but unavoidable activity. It tends to degrade, humiliate, and not infrequently destroy all but the most fortunate of those who engage in it.

When they travel outside the West today, and even when they are at home, Westerners are no longer exempt from terrorist actions and the taking of hostages. Especially when outside the West, well-off Westerners cannot count on personal safety and respectful treatment. Enmeshed in elaborate security arrangements, they face the real, if statistically still remote, possibility of being killed, maimed, or held hostage in the interest of some often obscure political sect's public relations, money-making efforts, or vendetta. The machine-gunning of a score of Westerners in Mumbai's most expensive hotels during December 2008 is but one illustration.

As reflected by the relatively illiberal surveillance, profiling, and other security measures Western governments are instituting, this new vulnerability of Westerners tends to weaken liberal attitudes and practices. Historic liberal protections of individual rights such as *habeas corpus* are loosened, while a "Dark Side," as a recent US vice-president termed it, involving the harsh interrogation, torture, and even assassination of suspected subversives is increasingly seen by Western governments as a necessary evil.

The basic political reason why liberal practices have failed to spread much beyond the comparatively few countries that enjoyed them a hundred years ago has been the failure of consensually united elites to form in most countries of the world. As pointed out in this issue's introductory article, an elite that is consensually united must emerge before any stable pattern of government conducive to substantial political freedom and meaningful political choice becomes possible.

Around 1900 such elites existed in no more than ten Western countries. Although they exist in perhaps about thirty countries today, most of these elites are located in Europe and the English-speaking countries. Recent Western political thought has generally failed to recognize this elite basis of democracy. Instead, it has naively urged democratic suffrage, free and fair elections, respect for personal liberties, and democratic constitutions on all countries of the world, most of which have deeply disunited elites that are engaged in dog-eat-dog political struggles. Much too blithely, in other words, Western thought has assumed that simply by adopting such measures countries will move from unstable and illiberal regimes to stable and liberal democracies. In particular, assiduous "democracy promotion" efforts have tended to persuade policymakers in the United States and other Western countries that instituting competitive elections where they do not now occur is a relatively sure route to democracy (Carothers 2002; 2004).

This failure to recognize the elite basis of any stable and liberal democratic political system – a failure that has much to do with how democratic elitism has been construed – is a manifestation of the Utopian assumption that political possibilities are open-ended. The failure also reflects a conflation of liberal and democratic values that need to be kept separate and distinct. Although democracy obviously belongs among the values of any liberal political system, it is not, contrary to most recent Western political thought, a reliable instrument for promoting liberal practices.

## Politics and Elites

The conflation of liberal and democratic values is rooted in the reluctance of Western political thought to entertain distasteful assumptions about the basis, nature and function of politics. One of these distasteful assumptions is that politics arise out of rationally irreconcilable conflicts of interest among people (Gray 2007). Such conflicts are irreconcilable in the sense that the parties to them cannot be shown or persuaded that they are mistaken about their interests. Not all conflicts have this character, of course, but many do, and it is these that are the principal bases of politics.

Where conflicts of interest are not rationally reconcilable, politics are the alternative to civil warfare. As history readily shows, politics are hardly a reliable alternative, yet they are frequently and widely accepted. This is because the many people in any society who lack substantial self-confidence, ambition, and assertiveness are usually prepared to tolerate politics in order to reduce the amount of violence and disorder that would otherwise occur. They are prepared to put up with political actions that are unsatisfactory to them in order to achieve a semblance of peace.

Behind any smoothly functioning political system, in other words, are expediential and tacit conclusions reached by individuals and groups. They con-

clude that trying to claim all they think they deserve is unprofitable, and that conforming to the political organization and distribution of privilege which happens to exist offers a better return than they might obtain by openly challenging the established order.

Because many of the conflicts that give rise to politics are not rationally reconcilable, political actions seldom fully "solve" social problems in any objective moral sense. "Social justice" is rarely attained through politics (or through any other activity) because in assuming that differences of interest are ultimately mistaken, social justice is a largely empty concept. As Bertrand de Jouvenal once observed (1963), political actions result only in "settlements." They contain, discourage, or repress the expression of interests that are not, and for the most part could not be, fully satisfied.

Although political settlements sometimes involve fairly even-handed compromises between entrenched and opposed groups, they necessarily sacrifice at least some interests that happen not to be well represented at the points and places where settlements are reached. This is because elites who are in positions to shape settlements normally expect to gain something for themselves and their friends from the settlements they orchestrate. In most political settlements, some interests are sacrificed merely by the efforts of elites to ensure that they, at least, are not disadvantaged.

Because there are no strictly objective moral solutions to many conflicts of interest, and because the elites who make their weight felt when shaping political settlements regularly produce more advantages for themselves and their allies, elites are commonly judged to be callous, deceitful and immoral. From perspectives that would be appropriate when judging many non-political activities, they are. But as a moral judgment about most or all elites, this common view is erroneous, and precisely because politics are a necessary activity that never allows fully open and trusting behavior. Political actions that are naively open and trusting are normally ineffective. On the other hand, actions that do not seek to coerce some persons in ways that are advantageous to others are by definition not political.

Given this nature of politics *per se,* appropriate moral judgments of elites are complex, controversial, and subtle. They are concerned with effectiveness, with humaneness, and with culturally shaped notions of fairness. Basically, they are concerned with the moral obligation of elites to avoid practices that *unnecessarily* reduce the satisfactions of some persons or *unnecessarily* degrade some persons' attitudes and behavior. Inevitably, these moral standards are culture-bound to a degree.

Thus, Western liberals have customarily approved of elite practices that create or preserve a certain type of self-reliant citizen. Western socialists, on the other hand, have regularly called for practices that would foster a more altruistic kind of citizen. Liberals and socialists have tended to disagree, in other words, about what constitute *unnecessarily* harsh and degrading elite actions.

The function of politics is to make possible the existence of all larger territorial organizations of people. These range from city-states to modern national states to world empires to such weakly organized supranational entities as the European Union or the United Nations. But when politics successfully perform this function by suppressing overt conflict and producing a reliability of expectations in social life, they tend to conceal their own nature from the persons who benefit most from them. Secure and influential, such persons lose sight of the basis, nature, and function of politics, and they come to mistake their own situations and sensibilities for those of people in general. They find it more or less impossible to believe that the political institutions and processes that so effectively protect and nurture them are regarded as more or less iniquitous by less fortunate people in their own and other societies.

In this way, successful politics undermine themselves. The most favored strata come to contain larger and larger numbers of sentimental and unrealistic persons who are unwilling to recognize that their fortunate circumstances emanate in large measure from how elites in their societies have practiced politics. These are individuals who like to talk about such things as social justice, politics without coercion, conflict resolution, participatory democracy and other constructs that can only be mainly imaginary. They seek to impose respect for such constructs on the elites who need their support. But if elites start to believe and profess such naïveté seriously, their own effectiveness is crippled. In the eyes of less advantaged people at home and abroad, such professions are patently insincere, and the elites who voice them are contemptible.

Only a ruthless tradition of intellectual honesty or a protected private tradition of objectivity among elites and their immediate supporters can resist this tendency of successful politics to be self-undermining. The politics of Western liberal countries in about 1900 were perhaps the most successful politics ever practiced. Yet, the intellectual life of none of these countries was able to prevent the naïve moral claims that this success inspired from coming to pervade the thought and utterances of elites and many otherwise sophisticated citizens.

## Liberal and Democratic Values

As developed originally by fairly well off bourgeois strata during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, especially in English-speaking countries and northwestern Europe, liberalism emphasized freedom from arbitrary political and legal restraints and from political interferences in legitimately private activities. Combining beliefs in religious tolerance, freedom of speech for those who discussed issues responsibly, and the social utility and inherent fairness of freedom for economic entrepreneurs, liberalism did not originally have any clear egalitarian thrust. During the nineteenth century the countries in which this doctrine was widely accepted achieved political and economic domination

over much of the world. Consequently, large parts of their populations experienced great increases in prosperity, leisure, and self-confidence.

With this, many adherents of liberalism in these countries found that political order and social peace were compatible with, and even facilitated by, wider and wider extensions of the suffrage. They discovered, in other words, that steady increases in national power and prosperity and the multiplication of attractive and reasonably influential job opportunities permitted the formal democratization of their governments without opening the way to participation by any great number of illiberal and deeply discontented persons.

Thus the English-speaking countries, the Low Countries, and the Scandinavian countries, in particular, enjoyed obvious success in democratizing their governments and in extending liberal practices. Most other West European countries moved in the same direction, although more severe conflicts among their elites made success less complete.

In this way, the attainment of stable liberal democracies gradually came to be seen as a plausible, even a natural progression. Liberals became increasingly committed to egalitarian values in terms of individual rights, including the right of suffrage. During the twentieth century this process led to the assumption that all of the principal features of modern liberal democracies are equal components of ultimate liberal values. These features include constitutional government, benign political, administrative and judicial practices, and democracy.

Looking at each in turn, constitutional government is distinguished from powerful monarchies and from the military and other dictatorships that occur sporadically in unstable political systems. Benign political, administrative and judicial practices strongly respect personal dignity by requiring governments to do three things: follow established laws; put themselves at a substantial disadvantage in proving persons to be wrongdoers; and refrain from governing at all in certain more or less understood matters, such as religion and other forms of belief. Finally, democracy, in the sense at least of universal suffrage exercised in real electoral contests, is used to determine leading government personnel.

With this the liberal became a staunch democrat, and the general pattern of government in the liberal societies of the West came to be labeled "liberal democratic." However, while this evolution of liberal values into those of liberal democracy was natural enough in the historical economic and political contexts of Western countries, in most other countries the twin commitments to liberal and democratic values are frequently, perhaps even always, in conflict.

This is the case because opening effective political participation to all organized factions in free and fair electoral contests leads inevitably to political claims that are unacceptable to many entrenched interests. Such interests are commonly numerous enough and well enough placed to carry out coups or electoral frauds that sweep away the threats to their ways of life and privileges that come from the operation of democratic suffrage. Where entrenched interests do not manage to do this, revolutionary efforts to overthrow and suppress

them produce dire situations. Newly ascendant "revolutionary" elites find it necessary to firm up their rule by curtailing liberties drastically.

In either respect, attempts to achieve liberal democracy merely by instituting democratic suffrage and holding elections are almost certain to be unsuccessful. This was amply illustrated by the repeated military coups that terminated newly established democratic regimes in Latin America during the 150 years following independence from Spanish and Portuguese rule. The general pattern of political struggles has been the same in Africa, the Middle East, and most of South and Southeast Asia since the end of colonial rule during the decades following World War II.

Linking the egalitarian goal of democracy with liberal goals such as personal freedom and orderly government has thus involved considerable confusion. It has diverted attention from the elite structures and practices that are everywhere a precondition for liberal political practices. In doing this it has been harmful to the liberal cause. A more sophisticated understanding would see democracy as an *instrumental* value that under certain elite conditions may promote or help realize *ultimate* liberal values. It is clear that constitutional government and at least some version of governmental practice respectful of personal dignity are empirically necessary to a liberal regime. But democracy in the sense of an extended or universal suffrage is not strictly necessary for such a regime. In many ordinary political circumstances it may be inimical to it.

To suppose, then, that a liberal should ultimately prefer democratic government for its own sake is, in fact, a somewhat naive and provincial position. It is a position that is speciously plausible to well-off persons who happen to live under stable liberal democratic regimes. Their favored circumstances enable them to derive personal satisfactions from democratic participation in their own government. But it has little plausibility for those who live under illiberal regimes or even for less well-off and less self-confident persons in liberal democracies.

In general, such persons have no interest in diligent part-time excursions into the kind of limited and negotiated politics that offer satisfactions to educated and relatively privileged citizens. Likewise, in contemplating liberal safeguards against violations of personal dignity, less well-off and less self-confident persons often conclude that these safeguards do little to protect their own dignity, which they may feel they have little of anyway. They see these safeguards instead preventing effective control of interests that they fear or for which they have no serious sympathy.

In order for liberal doctrine to obtain the allegiance of larger circles than the limited number of well-off amateur politicians who like democratic politics for the fun it affords them, it is necessary to highlight an *ultimate* liberal value that can be more widely shared. At the same time, this value must be distinguished

carefully from *instrumental v*alues that may or may not contribute empirically to its realization.

## A Social Milieu of "Free People"

A social milieu of "free people" constitutes the ultimate liberal value. This is a milieu in which people deal with each other as equals and in which no one claims for him or herself, nor expects to accord to others, systematically greater deference or higher privilege. The historical contexts that the expression "free people" calls to mind are those that liberals envisage as ideal: the Switzerland of William Tell; the Holland of William the Silent; the America of George Washington. However, to evoke these contexts is to make it clear that liberals value equality only insofar as it is linked to an active and individualistic freedom. Liberals care nothing for, and even abhor, the kind of equality that might prevail in a community of unassertive persons wholly submissive to custom or prevailing opinion.

The ultimate liberal goal is thus a social milieu in which persons are free and equal in active roles. Institutionalized politics and government practices that prevent violations of personal dignity contribute *instrumentally* toward achieving this milieu. Unstable politics involving coups and court intrigues, as well as government practices that readily degrade people, contribute *instrumentally* toward preventing or destroying it. As for democracy, or universal suffrage, its effectiveness as an *instrumental* device – or in Schumpeter's term a "method" – for achieving the desired liberal milieu varies with circumstances.

Characterizing a social milieu of free people as the ultimate liberal value implies that liberal attitudes normally require a substantial degree of good fortune, self-confidence, and optimism about the future. This is because the opportunity to interact with other persons freely and equally is of little value to those who do not possess the kinds of occupational and social roles and resulting temperaments that facilitate such interaction. Without changes in their situations, persons whose roles are seriously degrading, punishing, frightful or merely boring cannot be influenced toward, or converted to, liberal attitudes. Liberal attitudes can never be contagious, therefore, except among people already disposed by a certain amount of good fortune to accept them.

Yet in any complex and bureaucratized society there is always a shortage of the kinds of roles that enable people to interact freely, vigorously, and equally with each other. This means that pursuit of the liberal goal may sometimes mean "giving to him that hath" while "taking from him that hath not even that which he hath." Less abstrusely, and as an example, any commitment to "social justice" that involves as a matter of overriding principle concessions to, or privileges for, persons and groups in recompense for their past misfortunes is incompatible with a sophisticated allegiance to the liberal goal.

When granted on a principled and wide basis, such special concessions and privileges threaten to undermine the advantaged positions of those who are already liberal. In doing so they help to destroy liberal attitudes where they exist without providing any certainty that those being helped will themselves adopt such attitudes. No sophisticated liberal can favor such schemes on a principled basis.

## Elitism

Distinguishing between the ultimate liberal goal and instrumental liberal values places democracy and other egalitarian measures on a different footing from those presumed in most recent Western political thought. It re-emphasizes Schumpeter's conception of democracy as simply a political method that depends for its workings on a number of propitious and underlying circumstances. If liberals prefer ultimately to associate actively with free persons on a basis of equality, then obviously an entire society of "free persons" that is governed democratically and is otherwise egalitarian is the liberal *ideal.* Liberals would greatly prefer this to an oligarchic society in which only a small number of privileged people interact on a free and equal basis.

The problem is that the historical contingencies that produced societies at once liberal and egalitarian have been extremely rare. Such societies mostly have been tiny collectivities located in agrarian and isolated parts of Western countries that were advantaged over the rest of the world by early technological progress. Any liberal reasonably familiar with history would not believe that this ideal is attainable in most circumstances. The most that a realistic liberal normally can hope to attain or preserve is a society that is considerably more stratified, but which nevertheless has an upper layer of actively free and equal persons. Even this more modest ideal is hardly a common historical situation.

These considerations point toward elitism. Although the liberal's ideal is individualistic participation in a society of equal persons, is such a liberal honestly an egalitarian? An egalitarian is presumably a person committed to the equalization of people as an intrinsic good. When this egalitarian preference is held unconditionally, it is likely to prove incompatible with the liberal's preference for a society of free persons within which one can interact as an active equal. It is simply a matter of historical fact that liberals have sometimes enjoyed limited approximations of their ideal that would most probably have been upset or destroyed by thoroughly egalitarian measures.

In eighteenth-century England, for instance, a considerable number of well-off persons enjoyed an approximation of a liberal society in their own interactions. But most of the population was poor, uneducated, disfranchised, and subject to abusive treatment by authorities when speaking or acting in ways that threatened the well-off. It can hardly be supposed that in that time and place the liberal practices that existed would have survived if some force had

decreed formal equality for all and then actually implemented this decree by equivalents of today's affirmative action measures and confidence-building exercises in community action organizations for the deprived. Likewise, there can be little doubt that liberal practices in Western countries today would be destroyed if someone established a genuine world government with a full range of taxation and police powers and promoting arrangements designed to ensure that non-Western countries exercise proportionate shares of influence in the world government's policy-making.

The implication is that a person of liberal persuasion is prudently willing to accept his or her goal in the form of half a loaf if the alternative appears to be no bread at all. In other words, the liberal cannot honestly claim to be a committed egalitarian in the way that some persons are or believe themselves to be. The liberal is willing to live in a society where liberal practice extends only to that part of the population to which his or her associates belong, if further equalization can only be attained by upsetting this liberal social milieu.

Likewise, the liberal is willing to live in a liberal democracy that enjoys considerable advantages in technology and access to world resources over other countries only under certain conditions. One is that international equalization is not attainable without drastically curtailing living standards in the advantaged country so that its liberal practices would probably be destroyed. Another is that there is little prospect, because of the population ratios involved, that international equalization would create liberal practices in countries whose living standards would only be minutely increased thereby.

The liberal is necessarily *elitist*, however much this may clash with what he or she would prefer as an ideal if ideals could be made real. The liberal has had, or expects to have, enough good fortune to want and value the equal interaction of free and actively individualistic persons. He or she is more self-confident, more self-reliant, and less fearful of powerful persons and interests than the average person historically or today. The liberal is not, however, committed to inequality. He or she is not among those who prefer a society of unequal and mostly un-free persons in principle.

From the liberal's standpoint, in short, the more socially or geographically extended that a milieu of free and equal people is, the better. If the liberal were a magician, he or she would make all persons and all nations able to live together in active and self-assertive equality. But there are no magicians in social and political matters. That is, there is no simple, straightforward way to create or extend a society of free and equal persons by political or legal means.

It is obvious that, as socialists have argued, one cannot make unequal persons equal merely by declaring them equally qualified to vote and participate in formal politics, as in a democracy It is also obvious that one cannot make unequal persons equal merely by enforcing a variety of rules, principles, and standards designed to prevent people from taking advantage of their inequality. State socialism tried to do this and failed. The liberal does not seek social ad-

vantages as an ultimate goal but, instead, accepts advantages when they afford free and equal interaction with other persons and when there are no practical possibilities for widening the circle of liberal persons.

When contemplating political possibilities, the liberal is elitist as regards the desirability and feasibility of democratic practices. But the failure to distinguish the ultimate liberal goal from instrumental democratic considerations has caused liberals to misunderstand the real relation of democracy to liberal aims. By treating democratic government as an indistinguishable part of a cluster of goals, liberals have committed the error of thinking that formal equality in political statuses, democracy, is a reliable means for promoting liberal practices. Considered on its own merits, this proposition – that universal suffrage, frequent voting, and other democratic measures reliably, that is, regardless of circumstances, promote the interaction of free and actively equal persons – should be patently incredible to persons with much political experience or knowledge.

It is more nearly the other way around. Especially among elites, liberal practices such as avoiding the use of political means to pursue drastic social changes are essential to the year-in, year-out acceptance by different factions of a Schumpeterian competition for votes that determines who shall hold office and who shall define policies. This "live and let live" disposition among elites, which means a tacit agreement not to exacerbate potentially explosive conflicts and to respect each other's vital interests, is the *sine qua non* for any practical and durable degree of liberal democratic politics – for democratic elitism.

By contrast, in societies whose elites and other dominant elements are not liberal, those actually in political offices at any given moment fall into one of two categories. Most commonly, they represent advantaged strata that do not feel themselves secure against future contingencies. They necessarily use political power, if they can, to further entrench themselves and those they represent by reducing the freedom of less fortunate strata to upset the regime. Certainly notions about political freedom do not restrain them from doing this. they tolerate democratic practices only when it is convenient to do so, and ordinarily this is not for very long.

The other, less common category of political office-holders in a society where liberal practices are not firmly established consists of those who have been victorious in a recent revolutionary upheaval. Normally, these persons hold egalitarian convictions. But they are well aware, as modern liberals are not, that a newly triumphant elite must act in the way just described. Consequently, while members of this elite may regard "government by the people" as consistent with their convictions, they have no intention of letting the opportunity to reform society in an egalitarian direction slip through their hands. Certainly they do not take the chance of setting up an electoral competition that might be won by persons not sharing their convictions. Instead, they feel obliged to keep the electoral process effectively controlled in order to produce

results they alone approve of so long as they are able to do so. In short, they ignore the democratic practices that are of interest to liberals.

## Conclusions

Has the liberal's conflation of ultimate and instrumental values lasted too long to be reparable? Possibly so. Since at least World War II almost everyone who might be considered a liberal has characterized the ultimate liberal goal in democratic terms. The unanimity and fervor with which persons regarding themselves as liberals have urged extensive democratizations of their own societies and of illiberal non-Western ones indicate a near total confusion of cause and effect in their understanding of political possibilities. This confusion has greatly weakened the self-recognition of liberals to a remarkable point. It is uncertain whether liberal-minded elite and sub-elite Westerners are any longer capable of identifying and taking the kinds of initiatives that might deal constructively with the world's problems. They are blind to the fact that in their own societies the spread of democratic suffrage in ways that did not fundamentally undermine liberal practices depended on the prior existence of consensually united elites. This spread also probably depended on substantial world economic and military domination by the West. Consequently, they cannot comprehend that the absence of these conditions in most non-Western countries may necessitate less than democratic means of governing them.

I have tried to show – in a roundabout way that will have tried the reader's patience – how democratic elitism can be put on a firmer intellectual and comparative-historical footing than recent Western political thought has recognized. Writing as a liberal, Joseph Schumpeter correctly saw that democracy is a "method," or in my term an *instrumental* value, that can serve the ultimate liberal goal of a "free people." Addressing English-speaking readers in the early 1940s whom he plausibly assumed to be of liberal persuasion, Schumpeter did not highlight the comparative historical distinctiveness, indeed the rarity, of the democracy he described. Nor, perhaps conscious of his American location and its egalitarian proclivities, did he think it useful to highlight the elitism implicit in his description of democracy.

Numerous, mainly American critics of his theory did this soon enough. They depicted democratic elitism as an unwanted, even outrageous closure of the open-ended road to ideal democracy that they regarded their society and, they wanted to believe, all societies are traveling. Critics of democratic elitism have hoped to find some less elite-centered and more impersonal and universal form of democracy. This is probably a forlorn hope. They must come to terms with the more or less ineluctable aspects of politics and elites explored above. If and when they do, their conception of democracy will not differ significantly from that which Schumpeter offered.

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